

# Unable to see the forests for the deer

To ecologists Scotland's red deer are a menace, to estate owners they're lucrative meat. **Rob Edwards** hears both sides

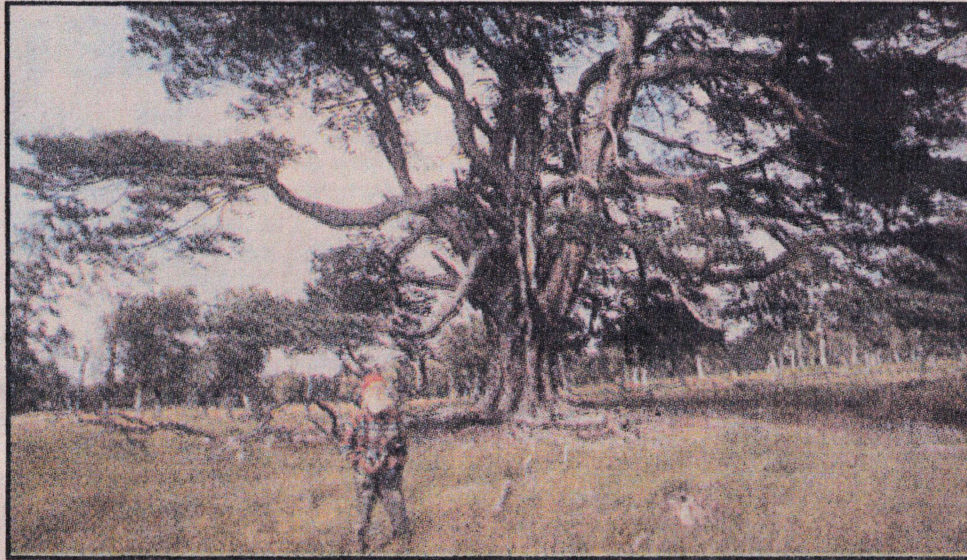
**A**DAM Watson loves nature. He cares passionately about trees and mountains. That is why he wants thousands of red deer to be killed.

As one of Britain's leading ecologists, he knows the damage the deer are causing in the Highlands. They are trampling vegetation, eroding soil and changing the landscape. Worst of all, they are destroying what little remains of the ancient Caledonian forest that used to cover much of Scotland.

Standing under a 500-year old pine tree at Mar Lodge in the eastern Cairngorms he can see the legacy of the deer all around him. "The main reason for the almost total lack of tree regeneration in these woods across the Highlands is that there have been too many deer," he says. "During the winter, when the deer are crowded into these woods for shelter, then they'll eat any tree seedling that's popping its head through the snow. Eventually these woods will become extinct."

Scotland's red deer population has doubled over the last three decades. There are now 300,000 roaming the hills. Estate owners' failure to cull enough hinds is partly to blame, also the recent mild winters.

Fragments of the native pine and birch woods that have graced Scotland since the last ice age are at risk from deer; at Mar Lodge and Glenfeshie in the Cairngorms, on the Royal Estate at



**Lonesome pine: ecologist Adam Watson sees the legacy of Scotland's red deer in the remains of the once great Caledonian forests**

Balmoral and in Glen Affric and Glen Strathfarrar near Inverness.

John Dibben, the Wiltshire businessman who owns 42,000 acres at Glenfeshie, denies that deer are to blame for erosion on his land, although he admits, in an interview broadcast on Channel 4's *Scottish Eye* tonight, that the number of deer on his estate prevents the woodland from regenerating.

With other landowners, Dibben is reluctant to cull as many deer as the conservationists want. He argues that culling 15% — 150 stags and 150 hinds out of a total population of 2,000 — is in line with traditional numbers for the estate. He says he could not afford to reduce the number of stags because it would damage his stalking income.

Each stag can add at least £25,000 to the capital value of the estate, as well as earning about £250 when shot. He advocates deer fencing as a compromise, but wants the taxpayer to pay.

Watson believes fences are too intrusive and too expensive, but cannot say precisely how many deer have to be killed. The requirement varies within one estate and can only be assessed by examining the trees, shrubs and soil.

Almost unnoticed last month, the Scottish Office began a consultation exercise on possible changes to deer legislation. Robin Callander, a land-use consultant and co-author of a report on deer by Rural Forum, a coalition of rural organisations, says: "The paper does not seem to start from the assump-

tion that we want a soundly managed red deer population in balance with its environment. It seems perhaps more concerned with protecting some of the existing vested interests in deer management."

The paper proposes the introduction of powers of last resort to force landowners to cull more deer where proven to be seriously damaging the environment. Not surprisingly landowners are opposed.

"I don't believe there's the necessity for compulsion in these matters," argues Richard Sidgwick, who factors more than 20 West Highland estates. He prefers the existing voluntary arrangements and is taking a leading role in forming a new Scottish association of deer management groups.

John Dibben claims sporting estates are a valuable part of Scotland's cultural heritage.

This version of history is disputed by Angus Macrae, who represents crofters on the Red Deer Commission. His grandfather was evicted by landlords to make way for sheep and deer.

"It would be impossible for me to accept that the sporting estate as we know it is part of the culture of the Highlands and the Islands. To have culture, to have heritage, one must have community, one must have people. Sporting estates were established by getting rid of people."

□ *The Plague of the Glen, a Scottish Eye documentary made by Edinburgh Film Workshop Trust. Today at 5pm, Channel 4.*

● **Rennie McOwan: Page 43**

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Scotland on Sunday